

Summer 1998

Things Exist in You Without Your Knowing It: Robert Penn Warren's "The Ballad of Billie Potts" as a Conglomeration of Myth and Folklore

Joe Sarnowski
University of Toledo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Sarnowski, Joe (1998) "Things Exist in You Without Your Knowing It: Robert Penn Warren's "The Ballad of Billie Potts" as a Conglomeration of Myth and Folklore," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol14/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu.

Things Exist in You Without Your Knowing It: Robert Penn Warren's "The Ballad of Billie Potts" as a Conglomeration of Myth and Folklore

Joe Sarnowski

Robert Penn Warren once said of himself:

It is often written that my poetic growing up was under the shadow of John Donne and the metaphysical poets. That is a part of the truth. But it was also much under the shadow of folk balladry, the Scotch bard of the Appalachians, and Southern sharecroppers. (*Reads Selected Poems*)

No single work by Warren best reflects this statement than "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (*New and Selected Poems* 287), as the poem consists of a narrative indicating the influence of "folk balladry" and a commentary indicating the influence of more formalistic verse such as that by the "metaphysical poets." Such formalistic, highly-literate influences tend to be the most studied, due in part to the fact that they traditionally have garnered more prestige. Consequently, influences from the oral and mythological traditions tend to be overlooked. Perhaps their prevalence throughout the arts dulls our sense of them: due to the commonness of these timeless tales, they often escape our notice. Yet they are indeed always present, continuing through us and our literature, being relived by us with various twists and turns, with diverse tangents and convergences. We are able to witness such a revival of myth and folklore by examining "The Ballad of Billie Potts."

Curiously, the process by which Warren came to write the poem mimics the very same process that transmits folklore. As stated in the prologue of the poem, Warren first heard the story from a relative, his grandfather's sister-in-law, Anna Mitchell. "The poem had its origin originally in hearsay," Warren says, "The old lady was chatting along, telling about things that happened, that she heard about when she was a girl" (*Talking* 344). That was in his childhood. Then years later, in 1943, after distinguishing himself as

a professor of English and as an author of highly-lettered verse, Warren's mind returned to his roots and began to create the poem "quite unconsciously." He says:

I remember the very day when I walked across the snow,
across the campus of the University of Minnesota, when I
began composing it. And I composed the first stanza or two
while walking along, roughly, and rewrote later. (*Talking* 296)

Warren also says that his rendition is "primarily the tale she told me," with the only major difference being that Mitchell's story placed the outlaws in the Kentucky caves, while he sets the story between the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers: "a very wild country at one time" (*Talking* 344). Here we see the transmission of folklore. Warren hears the story as a child from someone who also heard the story as a child. Just as the commentator of the poem says, "There was a beginning but you cannot see it" (1. 77), so do the various motifs contained in "The Ballad of Billie Potts" have origins which we cannot know. The same holds true for any given folktale. But also like any given folktale, it is not retold verbatim: the process of transmission invariably includes some alteration. Warren changes the setting of his account of "Billie Potts." Whether this is done for thematic reasons or not, he does not say. But by placing the action "between the rivers" instead of the Kentucky caves, a different wrinkle is added to the story. Thus are all stories transmitted and altered through time, with new strains added while others are subtracted.

The poem conveniently distinguishes itself as being composed of two distinct yet intertwining strands, which parallel the two sides of Warren himself. Roughly half of the poem, set off with parentheses, provides a running commentary and analysis. These lines vary widely between the use and non-use of meter, the "diction of the passages is often latinate" (Clark 638), and they demonstrate the side of Warren being the Yale- and Oxford-educated scholar. But this study will examine the other half of the poem—the narration, which reveals Warren as the traditional yarn-spinner.

The question arises as to whether the piece is actually a ballad. One scholar states that the narration is "not metrically a ballad" (Clark 637). Although it does not follow a stringent ballad format, one can nevertheless recognize the piece as a ballad. Nearly every

line of the narration contains four stressed syllables, except the lines of the refrain ("In the land between the rivers," or sometimes "section between the rivers") or lines that echo the refrain (such as 11. 7, 20, and 112). These lines contain three accents. But despite the question over the metrics, "the narrative contains unmistakably balladlike qualities. It tells a violent tale with tragic implications. Like innumerable traditional ballads, it becomes dramatic through the introduction of frequent dialogue" (Clark 637). Also, rather than commonplaces, the narrative contains numerous instances of regional vernacular (like "holler"—1. 4, "clabberheaded"—1. 16, and "skeedaddle"—1. 189), and the humor expressed in Little Billie's failed ambush (the way he "wet his clothes"—1. 79 — and how his intended victim can chuckle over Little Billie's swift departure even though there had just been an attempt on his life —11. 180-1) helps create the atmosphere of a regional yarn. And this may be the pivotal factor in classifying Warren's narrative as a ballad. For as one scholar notes:

The technical components [of the ballad] are really effective only in context; and that context is a special cultural and artistic tradition. The ballads are closely associated with a particular way of living and thinking; in one sense, the folklore is the poetry. (Hodgart 34)

While Warren is not working out of the cultural and artistic tradition that gives us the ballad, that tradition is undeniably an influence on his own cultural and artistic mind set. So Warren neither replicates nor ignores the ballad form, but constructs his own form to tell his tale.

But of course "The Ballad of Billie Potts" is not just one tale. It contains about a dozen different aspects with different antecedents in folklore myth. All these elements combine to tell a complex story dealing with the complex nature of human existence. So the question arises: how conscious was Warren of all these antecedents? When he was told of the work of German critic Adam John Bisanz on just these aspects of "Billie Potts," Warren responded that he was not aware of such antecedents, but that he was not surprised they existed (*Talking* 344). ¹In other words, Warren intuitively knew that as a storyteller he was a repository for other stories. It is the work of the critic, not the author, to identify these various antecedents.

Perhaps the most arresting motif of the poem, explored carefully by Bisanz, is one which scholars call "*Killing the Returned Soldier*." In it, "the son returns home from military service, brings a large sum of money with him, and is unwittingly killed by his parents" (Aarne 939A). Tales with this or a similar motif are found in numerous European languages: German, Livonian, Lithuanian, French, Hungarian, Czech, Slovenian, Greek, as well as English. This motif also appears in the United States. Most notably, an untitled story told by a Polish immigrant, named Joe Woods, provides an enlightening comparison with "Billie Potts" (Dorson 136).

The parents, after mortgaging their farm, send their son, Alexander, to America to make money. After ten years, the son returns to Poland. Because of his whiskers, he now looks different and intends to surprise his parents. But before going to the farm, at an inn he meets some relatives including his godfather. Alexander reveals himself there, tells his intentions, and goes to the farm. He asks his parents for lodgings and asks if his money will be safe. Then during the night, the parents cut Alexander's throat and bury him in the manure pile — but the whole incident is witnessed by a shepherd boy hiding behind the stove. The next day, the godfather comes to the farm asking for Alexander. The parents realize their mistake but do nothing. However, the chief of police investigates, gives the shepherd boy an apple, and the boy tells what he saw.

Like Little Billie, Alexander goes west to the new land for ten years and makes his fortune. Returning, both Alexander and Little Billie have beards which make them unrecognizable to all who previously knew them. Both set out to play a trick on their parents, but do not take into consideration the parents' greed and desperation. Both sons are killed in vulnerable positions: Alexander, as he sleeps; and Little Billie, as he drinks (just like the antagonist in the Grimms' tale, "*Fundevogell*"). And in both stories, the true identity of the victim-son is brought to light by a third party — Alexander's godfather and Joe Drew. Bisanz points out the European ballads employing this motif typically end with the suicides of the parents, which draws another comparison between Warren's and Woods' stories. In the Polish-American tale, the future punishment of the parents is assumed once the chief of police learns the truth. And in Warren's tale, Big Billie and his wife are punished only by the harsh irony of their actions. Obviously,

the number of correlations between the two tales indicates that they have a common ancestor.

But there are significant differences as well. Some of the most noticeable differences are indicative of the two distinct regions of Poland and Kentucky. For example, Alexander's parents bury their son in the manure pile: this is not only appropriate for the farm setting but further shows the parents' desperation as they dispose of the corpse in such a coarse manner. Also, Little Billie's parents commit their crime unseen, suggesting the isolation in rural America in the last century; but the shepherd boy witnesses the crime of Alexander's parents, suggesting the sense of community indicative of small town Europe. And while the third party of "Billie Potts" is simply an old acquaintance, in Alexander's case this part is played by the godfather—certainly a reasonable choice for a dominantly Roman Catholic country. But as a figure of religious and familial significance, the character of the godfather provides a moral and ethical center lacking in "Billie Potts." This absence of a center is not surprising, for the Potts family is quite criminal from the onset, while Alexander's parents are driven to murder by hardship. While Alexander leaves home with the honorable goal of easing his family's financial burden, Little Billie is literally thrown out in shame and forced to prove himself in the world: a stereotypically American idea. And while legal sanctions upon Alexander's parents are presumed, irony in the Potts case serves as its only point of reckoning.

Still, the most obvious difference in these stories is between their respective lengths. Alexander's story is brief, without extraneous details and complications. "The Ballad of Billie Potts," however, contains several intertwining motifs which adds to its complexity.

Another motif also explored by Bisanz is the "*Treacherous innkeeper*" (Thompson K2241), characterized by the way Big Billie demonstrates hospitality ("He would slap you on your back and set you at his table"—1. 46) and then conspires to murder certain guests. A Virginia folk tale also contains a pair of "Murderous Tavern Keepers" (Barden 200). There, just as in the Potts tale, a husband and wife team have a "Place where people had [a] habit of puttin' up to stay all night when they 'uz travellin'." Like the Potts', the couple in the Virginia tale uses axes to kill, but unlike Warren's poem their intentions are discovered before they can commit the deed. With the fact that many Virginians moved west to settle in

Kentucky, one can see how some forerunner to this tale also migrated west, where it became part of the Potts story.

Another motif is that of "*Recognition by birthmark*" (Thompson H51. 1). One can see this motif in the Grimm tale No. 92, "The King of the Golden Mountain" (Magoun 337). In that story, when the son returns with all the trappings of a prosperous man, the parents do not recognize him. But what proves to them that this man is indeed their son is the "raspberry mark under his left arm." Likewise, in the Potts tale, the Little Billie who returns, with all the outward signs of affluency and maturity, does not resemble the Little Billie who left "With blood on his shirt and snot in his nose / And pee in his pants" (11. 178-9). So it is only by the birthmark that the parents can realize that they killed their own son, and thereby finally feel the sting of conscience.

This sting of conscience, this realization of guilt introduces another motif (mentioned by Bisanz without any corroborating textual comparisons) by suggesting Big Billie and his wife to be a kind of American Adam and Eve, "fallen but unaware of sin" (Strandberg 115-6). "The land between the rivers," aside from being a section of Kentucky, is the translation of "Mesopotamia:" "regarded in Semitic myths, including the Garden of Eden story, as the birthplace of mankind" (Strandberg 115). Just as the traditional interpretation of the Genesis story places a large amount of blame on Eve, so does "Billie Potts" single out the wife as being particularly evil. Despite Big Billie's treachery, his gregarious demeanor may not cause him to be seen as totally corrupt in the eyes of some. Such is not the case with the wife. Early on, she is identified as being "clever with her wheel and clever with her kettle" (1. 10). Both of these domestic utensils are associated with wicked characters in the Grimm tales: the spinning wheel is used by the manikin in "Rumpelstiltskin;" and of course every good witch has a kettle, like those in "Funde vogel" and "Hansel and Grethel." And just as Eve gave Adam the forbidden fruit, so does the wife give "the old man a straight look" and "the bucket [that] was not empty but it was not water," because it contained the murder weapon (11. 326-7). Or, from another view, one can interpret Little Billie to be the forbidden fruit which the wife delivers: recall that Big Billie says of their son, "I figgered he was a ripe 'un," to which the wife answers, "but you wouldn't done nuthen hadn't bin fer me" (11. 344-5). Then after Little Billie is dead, his parents rifle through his pockets and bury him "in the

dark of the trees" (l. 343) — this last phrase being, perhaps, reminiscent of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We may also see shades of Adam in Big Billie. As Adam is interpreted to be the progenitor of sin, so does Big Billie pass his wickedness onto his son. Or as one scholar notes:

From the spectacle of Little Billie re-enacting the sin of his father . . . we may infer a concept of original sin: the father molding the son into his own perfect image, the ancestral (moral) weakness recurring in successive generations. (Strandberg 119)

Nearly every murder tale can in some way be compared to another Genesis story: that of Cain and Abel. First of all, Cain kills Abel out of envy — because God regards Abel's offering but not his. Likewise, Big Billie kills due to his envy for the money of others. When Cain conspires to kill his brother, he first appears to be non-threatening but then slays Abel suddenly (Genesis 4:8). This same technique is used twice in "Billie Potts:" first when Little Billie attempts to kill, and then when he dies at the hand of his father. The moral of the Genesis story is typically stated as being that killing a person is the same as killing a family member — that murder is also to murder a part of oneself. The same moral applies to the poem, in that, as Warren himself points out, Little Billie "dies by his own blood — and name" (*Talking* 344).

"The Ballad of Billie Potts" bears resemblance to portions of yet another Biblical story — but this time in a reverse way (a fact mentioned, again, by Bisanz without textual comparisons). In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), a son asks for his inheritance and then leaves home for "a far country" (v. 13). The son then squanders his fortune, and in order to survive he finds employment feeding swine (the most despicable possibility in the minds of Christ's Hebrew audience). Then the son realizes that he can go back to his father and live better, if only as a servant. So the son returns home ready to show contrition. "But when [the son] was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (v. 20). The father then restores the son and orders the fatted calf to be prepared for a celebration. And the delight of the father is epitomized by his statement: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again" (v. 24).

"The Ballad of Billie Potts" takes these affirming aspects of the parable and twists them into a dark moral. Little Billie does leave home with a large sum of money, but instead of departing at will he is cast out in shame. Also, instead of losing his money in the "new country" (1. 218), Little Billie strikes it rich, returning with all the signs of success: fine clothes, expensive pistols, "And a look in his eyes like he owned the earth" (1. 247). So rather than the father restoring the son, in "Billie Potts" the reverse is expected. As such, Big Billie does not recognize his son, unlike the father in the parable. And because of this, instead of killing the fatted calf, Big Billie kills his own son: the son that lived is dead. This act of turning the charming, innocent tale into a sober, horrible one is very close to what Warren does with a section of poems entitled "Nursery Rhymes" in his collection, *You, Emperors, and Others*. A good example is the second stanza of "News of Unexpected Demise of Little Boy Blue" (66):

Come blow your horn, Little Boy Blue,
Or I'll make your bottom the bluest part of you.
Come blow your horn, you Little Gold-bricker,
Or I'll snatch you baldheaded in a wink, or quicker.
Little Boy, you'll get no more ice cream.
Nobody will come when you have a bad dream.
Where is that pretty little horn I gave you?
I simply won't tolerate such behavior.

So just as Warren takes the nursery rhyme, inserts a different speaker's tone, and thereby changes the whole effect, so may he reverse selected aspects of the parable of the prodigal son to suit "The Ballad of Billie Potts."

John Burt points out that the circumstances surrounding Little Billie's death are partially narcissistic (89-90), which of course suggests the story of Narcissus from Greek mythology. Recall that Narcissus, while spurning the love of Echo, is dazzled by his own reflection in a pool of water and eventually dies there — or, in some versions, he is caused to love his reflected image by the jealous Echo. Likewise, Little Billie's return home is a kind of Narcissistic adventure. The poem's commentator states that in the West Little Billie has acquired "a new name and a new face" (1. 239). The new personal markers can be both literal (in an assumed name and in beard growth) and figurative (in the

evolution of a different self). In part, Little Billie's quest is to see his new self in the place "whar [he] done [his] grownen / In the section between the rivers" (11. 257-8), so as to better differentiate between the old and the new. He is satisfied in part by fooling his parents. The he goes to the spring, where he "gets down on his knees / And props his hands in the same old place" (11. 337-8). And as he goes to drink, "there is the face" (1. 340) when his father "set[s] the hatchet in his head" (1. 342). Just as Narcissus meets his demise under the fascination of his own image, so does Little Billie, under the urge to witness his self, meet his doom.

So, as we have seen, the narrative elements of "The Ballad of Billie Potts" contain the motifs and textual features of many other tales, all spun together in a relatively natural, unpretentious way. Because of this balance of source diversity and naturalistic tone, as noted earlier, it is unlikely that the poem was composed with all these elements in the conscious mind of the poet. Only superhuman poetic skill could compose verse with so many elements without appearing contrived. Fortunately, superhuman skill is not required: for all of these myths and folk tales exist in our culture — and therefore in our minds. They are always there. And of course the most common parts of our lives are the ones we overlook the most, yet they are the things most truly ourselves. Or as Warren says: "Things exist in you without your knowing it. You don't know what comes out of yourself, but it comes. It is you" (*Talking* 344).

Works Cited

- Aarne, Antti. *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*. Trans. Stith Thompson. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1965.
- Barden, Thomas E., ed. *Virginia Folk Legends*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1991.
- Burt, John. *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.
- Clark, William Bedford. "A Mediation on Folk History: The Dramatic Structure of Robert Penn Warren's 'The Ballad of Billie Potts.'" *American Literature* 49: 635-45.
- Dorson, Richard M. "Polish Tales from Joe Woods." *Western Folklore* VIII no. 2.
- Hodgart, M.J.C. *The Ballads*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1962.
- Magoun, Francis P. Jr. and Alexander H. Krappe, trans. *The Grimms' German Folktales*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1960.
- Strandberg, Victor H. *A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P. 1965.

Thompson, Stith. *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1957.

Warren, Robert Penn. *You, Emperors. and Others: Poems 1957-1960*. New York: Random House, 1960.

—. *New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985*. New York: Random House, 1985.

—. *Robert Penn Warren Reads Selected Poems, 1923-1978*. Caedmon, COL5, 1980.

—. *Talking with Robert Perth Warren*. Eds. Floyd Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks. Athens: U of Georgia P. 1990.

Work Consulted

Bisanz, Adam John. "Robert Penn Warren: The Ballad of Billie Potts: Ein amerikanisches Memorabile auf dem Hintergrund europaischer Überlieferung." *Fabula* 14: 71-90.

NOTES

¹To my knowledge this article has not been published in translation. A rough but highly suitable translation was provided to me by Susan Elizabeth Vogel, then an undergraduate at the University of Toledo.